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ADOT sets a deadline to choose freeway link

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The Arizona Department of Transportation on Monday set the clock ticking on a self-imposed, 60-day deadline to pick a western alignment for the proposed South Mountain Freeway.

Other timetables, dynamics and possible lawsuits will key off ADOT's decision regarding its recommended freeway route.

After a morning meeting with officials from several Valley cities, ADOT Director Victor Mendez said the agency would review officials' concerns, along with issues of cost and community upheaval.

"This (freeway) has major implications to the entire region, not just the local areas," Mendez said.

By the end of June, ADOT wants to determine whether the western leg of the 22- to 26-mile corridor should link to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue, 71st Avenue or Loop 101.

The project could cost up to \$2.4 billion.

The South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, a volunteer panel sponsored by ADOT, recommended last week that the freeway be connected at Loop 101.

That stance goes against the political will of Phoenix and several West Valley cities that support the 55th Avenue alignment proposed in the 1980s.

No city has gone on record supporting anything other than the 55th Avenue link, Mendez said.

If ADOT goes with anything other than the plan approved by the Maricopa Association of Governments in 1988, its proposal must go back to the MAG Regional Council for approval.

"We just want to make sure that the cities are listened to in this process," said Tom Remes, intergovernmental liaison for Phoenix, who was present at the cities' meeting with Mendez. "The city of Phoenix has planned this route for a number of years."

Officials from Phoenix and Tolleson have indicated that they're willing to pursue legal action against the state if anything other than 55th Avenue is chosen: Tolleson to prevent its 6-square-mile town from being split by the 101 connection, and Phoenix to defend two decades of planning based on the original route.

No legal action can be taken until ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration issue their final report, expected in late 2007.

"There's always a chance that anyone can sue you," Mendez said. "Hopefully it won't happen here."